PLEROMA AND FULFILMENT

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF HISTORY IN ST. IRENAEUS' OPPOSITION TO GNOSTICISM

BY

R. A. MARKUS

To study the work of St. Irenaeus, 'that most painstaking enquirer into all the heretical doctrines', as Tertullian was to call him (*adv. Val.* 5), is to study the Church's response to the great religious movement which we have come to call 'gnosticism'—and to study it in its most decisive phase. The qualification is important: for Irenaeus bequeathed to the Church a task of assimilation which was to take generations of theologians to accomplish. Nonetheless, I think we can see in his work both the basic lines of orientation in face of the 'heresy' which were to prevail, and—though only in the merest hints and nuances—the possibilities of synthesis which seemed to offer themselves.

Following the language of all the Fathers, I have just referred to this movement as a 'heresy'. In fact, if there has been a possibility of doubt in the past, the discovery in 1946 of a whole gnostic library containing forty-eight treatises (at Nag Hammadi in Upper Egypt) has made it clear that the religious movement we are dealing with was something much wider than a Christian heresy. It was a religious current of vast dimensions, independent of, and perhaps anterior to Christianity, which, for a time and in certain places, crossed Christian territory and assimilated Christian elements into its language and symbolism, and here and there into its ritual. This much, at any rate, seems to be certain, though study of all this newly found material alone will show us more clearly the affinities and sources of this movement. Can we, however, with what is already known, [1] attempt to discern the manner of St. Irenaeus's orientation in face of it?

[1] For a general description and discussion of the Nag Hammadi texts, Cf. H. C. Puech, Les nouveaux écrits gnostiques découverts en Haute-Egypte,

I think we can: for we have his own account of the doctrines he was refuting, and as Père Sagnard has shown, [2] his account is quite as reliable and fair-minded as we should expect from the hints he gives us [3] of the care he took to get to know his opponents' doctrines. This judgement is not invalidated by material that has since come to light. From what Irenaeus tells us, and from the scanty sources which we possess in addition to this information, we can reconstruct a tolerably coherent picture, not only of the main features common to the teaching of the multifarious sects, but also a fairly detailed picture of particular schools, above all, of Valentine and his disciple, Ptolemy, and of Mark, whose followers seem to have been responsible for the greatest ravages wrought in Irenaeus's own flock, in the Rhône valley. These between them constitute the chief object of his critique, and it is their teaching I have primarily in mind in this paper. I shall also use the *Excerpts from Theodotus* [4] and the *Fragments of Heracleon* [5]—products of the same stream though representing divergent traditions—to elucidate their teaching where this seems to me both necessary and legitimate.

---

in *Coptic Studies in honour of Walter Ewing Crum*, Boston, 1950. Descriptions of the 'Letter of James', the 'Gospel of Truth' (mentioned by Irenaeus, AH. III. 11. 9) and of a 'Letter to Rheginos on the Resurrection', are given by H. C. Puech & G. Quispel, Les écrits du Codex Jung, in *Vigiliae Christianae*, VIII. (1954), pp. 1–51. The treatise 'On the three Natures' also contained in this treatise is unfortunately not available at the time of writing. Three further texts are discussed by Togo Mina & J. Doresse, in *Vigiliae Christianae*, II. (1948), pp. 129–160, and a general note is given in *Vigiliae Christianae* III. (1949), pp. 129–136. Versions of two of the treatises now discovered, the *Apocryphon Ioannis* and a 'Wisdom of Jesus Christ', are included in the still unedited Berlin Codex. A general survey of these, together with the remaining three coptic gnostic treatises hitherto known is given by Walter C. Till, Die Gnosis in Aegypten, in *Parola del Passato*, XII. (1949), pp. 230–249.

[2] In his monumental study, *La Gnose Valentinienne et le témoignage de saint Irenée*, Paris, 1947.

[3] *Adversus Haereses* (AH henceforth), I. Praef. 2; IV. Praef. 1 etc. I have used Harvey's edition of the text, except for Book III, for which I have used Sagnard's new critical edition, Paris 1952. (*Sources Chrétiennes*) (SC henceforth). References are throughout given to the traditional text-divisions of Massuet.

[4] Ed. Sagnard, SC. Paris, 1948.

[5] From Völker, *Quellen zur Geschichte der christlichen Gnosis*, Tübingen, 1932.

Ptolemy's teaching is of peculiar importance in assessing Irenaeus' position: for not only does he expound this most fully,[6] but, in addition, Ptolemy's *Letter to Flora*, which has come down to us,[7] provides us with valuable sidelight on and (as Professor Quispel has shown, in a discerning analysis of its contents) confirmation of Irenaeus' summary of the esoteric doctrine behind it.

Ptolemy has modified Valentinian teaching in important respects; he has gone a long way to make it more acceptable to Christian ears. And yet, he has remained fundamentally a Valentinian, he has set himself to answer the questions asked by his master, and answers them within the mythological scheme elaborated by his master. And in Valentine we are faced with a man to whom his most uncompromising opponents could not deny outstanding intellectual power, a man who, it is now becoming increasingly clear,[8] succeeded in welding disparate material from various sources into a powerful and original synthesis. The gnosis which he claimed to possess and to teach provided men with the answers to the questions which one of his oriental disciples lists for us: 'What were we? What have we become? Where is it we were, and where have we been cast? Whither are we hastening? How are we redeemed? What is generation and what is regeneration?' (Exc. Theod. 78.2)[9] Valentine came to Rome from Alexandria, where he had had a unique chance to inherit all the machinery of Greek philosophy as well as the impulses of Pagan, Jewish and Christian religion, and probably also of already existing movements similar to his own.[10] But this must

---

[6] I am accepting Père Sagnard's conclusions in regard to the identification of the provenance of the doctrine summarised in AH I. 1–10.

[7] The edition used is that by G. Quispel, SC. Paris, 1949. The translation and analysis appended are also to be found in *Vig. Chr.* II. (1948) pp. 17–56

[8] Cf. G. Quispel, The Original Doctrine of Valentine, in *Vig. Chr.* I. (1946). pp. 43–73, and an interpretation in La conception de l'homme dans la gnose valentinienne, *Eranos Jahrbuch*, 1947. pp. 249–286. Also, Quispel, *Gnosis als Weltreligion*, Zürich, 1952. C. VI. Perhaps this is the place to say — if only I could say — how much I owe to this beautiful little study.

[9] Cf. the Gospel of Truth, quoted by Puech & Quispel, *loc. cit.*, p. 35. cf. *infra*, n. 26. p. 206.

[10] It is surely significant for the state of the Egyptian Church at this time, c. A. D. 140, that Valentine had not apparently found it necessary to break with it until after his arrival in Rome. Admittedly, as M. Cerfaux urges

not be allowed to obscure the intensely personal character of his answer. For, we are told (Hippolytus, *Ref.* VI. 37), that he claimed to have had a vision of a newly born child, who on interrogation revealed himself to be the Logos. 'He thereupon put forward a tragic myth *(τραγικόν τινα μῦθον)*, whereby he sought to propagate the revelation vouchsafed him in the heresy he founded.' For us, to be sure, the 'tragic myth' tends to dissolve into the interplay of personified abstractions; but even so, as reconstructed with the imaginative skill and scholarship that Professor Quispel has brought to the task, they breathe some of that air of poetic expression which lies not very far behind them, which is also so characteristic of the small handful of the surviving fragments. Valentine was first and foremost, to a degree far beyond his disciples, a poet who sang of the vision granted him and of the world bathed in its light.[11] For all its philosophical affinities, for all its debt to Christianity, Valentinian thinking takes place in the dimension of mythology.

The originality and power of Valentinian gnosis lies in the mythological expression of an intensely personal vision of the world and experience of self. This is true, primarily, of Valentine's own teaching, and of the earlier and simpler stages of gnostic thought. But notwithstanding the growth of complexity and abstractness, mythology it was and remained. What gnostic teaching is *about*, whatever its background and mode of expression, is something very different from philosophical reflection. This, surely, is what is behind the indignant bewilderment of Plotinus's criticism of the gnosticism he was acquainted with.[12] The fact, however, that he

(La Gnose, Essai de théologie manqué, in *Irenikon*, XVII. (1940), p. 20), the strong opposition encountered by Clement and Origen in Alexandria presupposes a well-established tradition of Christian orthodoxy, a 'religion of the simple'. I do not, however, see that this need exclude the possibility of a strong 'gnostic' tradition existing alongside and perhaps rubbing shoulders in uneasy fellowship with it — at any rate as early as 140. This is not, of course, to countenance the suggestion that Christianity had come to Egypt in Gnostic guise (Harnack).

[11] Cf. the psalm preserved by Hippolytus, Fr. 3, Völker, Quellen, p. 59. Irenaeus' ironical references (e.g. AH. 1. 4. 3, 11. 4, 15. 4; II. 12. 3.) also clearly presuppose a knowledge of the tragic claims of the myth.

[12] If it is the gnostics' separation of this world from the divine, and their

thought it so much as worth-while criticising the un-Platonic and un-Greek features of their teaching does draw attention to the philosophical mould in which the myth was cast. The bulk of Irenaeus's refutation in Book II of the *Adversus Haereses*, likewise, moves on a quasi-philosophical level. Facts like this give us some indication that the more seriously one takes the mythology, the less can one escape paying attention to the exigencies in the gnostic doctrines of the philosophical language and framework.

One of the central points at which we can observe the entry into the mythological structure of current Greek philosophical notions—as well as of language also used by Christian theology, and the New Testament revelation itself,—is by examining the gnostic concept of the Pleroma. If we can then assess the precise bearings of Irenaeus's criticism at this point, we shall be in a position to see what, at bottom, is his attitude to philosophical and mythological thinking, and in what way he proceeds to reaffirm the Christian content of notions of this sort, assimilated into gnostic teaching. The Pleroma or divine world fulfils a dual role in the Valentinian myth. The drama of the Aeons which takes place within it is the archetypal image of the human condition; and the world which it contains is also the origin of our world and the final destination of the elect.

In its first role, the myth tells us of a divinity which transcends all knowledge and comprehension,[13] known only to its first and most direct emanation; it tells of the bi-polar, male-female character to which the pairs of Aeons composing the Pleroma owe both their completeness and their fertility in producing further offspring. It

---

indifference to ethical reflection which, above all, provoke Plotinus to wrath (Cf. *Enn.* II. 9), it is surely the mythological character of their teaching disguised behind sometimes Platonic modes of expression which is the source of his baffled perplexity. The 'blasphemy' of their dualistic teaching (*Enn.* II. 9. 10) manifests, in his view, a facet of their un-Greek, un-philosophical and un-Platonic mistakes which he castigates (*Enn.* II. 9. 6). Just how the gnosticism he encountered in his own circle relates to that of the Valentinian school more than a century earlier, will no doubt become clearer when the three treatises contained among the Nag Hammadi texts which Porphiry mentions as known to Plotinus (in his *Life of Plotinus*, c. 16) are available for study.

[13] For the most impressive statement of this 'negative theology', cf. the Apocryphon Joannis, in Quispel, *Gnosis* . . ., c. II.

pictures the primal sin in terms of an undue [14] striving, a passion to know the unknowable, and its result as the estrangement from self, a fall from the integrity of the Pleroma and consequent dereliction. The drama of the Pleroma concludes with a last act, the restoration of the lost integrity.[15]

But this 'prologue in heaven' is not only the archetype of the human drama: it is also its source. The world of creatures is the result of the estrangement which has taken place in the Pleroma: it is the product of the fall of the youngest Aeon, Sophia, and her exclusion from the Pleroma.[1]/ The creator-God of the Old Testament is her creature, formed with the help of a new emission from the Pleroma, the Saviour, sent to heal her. Through this Demiurge the rest of the world is created from her passions: sorrow, fear, anguish, and, embracing and at the root of all, ignorance. These are the components from which the Demiurge separates 'material' or 'earthy' *(ὑλικόν, χοϊκόν)* and 'animal' *(ψυχικόν)* substance—the totality of the world under his dominion.

All creation is ultimately derivative from the Pleroma and from the estrangement in it. But only that which is 'spirit' *(πνευματικόν)*, the seed planted through the agency of the Demiurge, but without his knowledge, in one class of men, the elect, by their mother Sophia, is readmitted into the Pleroma at the final consummation of the world-process. Of the rest, the 'material' is destroyed in the final conflagration, the 'animal', if it has chosen 'the better part', is saved from destruction in the society of the Demiurge, but not admitted into the Pleroma.

Perhaps this outline is sufficient to indicate the role of the Pleroma in the Valentinian myth. Let us now attempt to see what is meant

[14] On the distinction (of Stoic origin) between quiet inclination *(ὁρμή)* and excessive desire or passion *(πάθος = ὁρμὴ πλεονάζουσα)*, of great importance in gnostic thought, cf. G. Quispel, Philo und altchristliche Häresie, in *Theol. Zeitschr.* 1949, pp. 429–436.

[15] I am following in this account the strand of the Valentinian myth which Père Sagnard, following Förster, calls the 'A theme', as distinct from the theme to be stressed more later which sees the primal sin in terms of a desire to imitate the non-bisexual fertility of the Father.

[16] Or that of her Enthymesis or of her miscarriage; the variants make no difference for my purposes.

by the word in Valentinian language and why the divine world of its mythology should be called the Pleroma.

The word had, of course, already played a considerable part in St. Paul's theological language. Whatever the meaning which his Colossian and Ephesian correspondents attached to it,[17] it is quite clear that the word was a technical term of stoic philosophical language, the theological *koinè*, as Reitzenstein has called it,[18] for all the religious movements of late antiquity. There were, of course, non-technical colloquial and commercial uses for the word, which also appear in the Septuagint and the New Testament in phrases like 'the earth and the fulness thereof', 'the fulness of time', etc; and it seems to have been quite common in profane usage to mean the 'complement', for instance, in reference to a gang of workmen required for a job or the crew of a ship.[19] But it is to the widely established current philosophical usage found in writings like those of the Hermetic Corpus [20] to which we must go for light on its meaning in gnostic contexts. Looking through these writings, which come from

[17] Cf. on the Pauline meaning, above all, J. Dupont, Gnosis — La connaissance religieuse dans les épitres de saint Paul, Louvain, 1949. The most recent and most complete treatment of this subject, to which I owe a great deal, is to be found in chapter VII. Also: R. Bultmann, Gnosis (review of Dupont), *JTS. NS* III. (1952) pp. 10–26; and Lightfoot, *St. Paul's Epistles to the Colossians and Philemon*, 2nd. Ed., London, 1876, pp. 257 ff; J. A. Robinson, *St. Paul's Epistles to the Ephesians*, 2nd. Ed., London, 1914; pp. 255 ff; L. Cerfaux, *La Théologie de l'Eglise suivant saint Paul*, Paris, 1948, pp. 244–278, & *Le Christ dans la théologie de saint Paul*, Paris, 1951, p. 320. F. Prat, *La Théologie de saint Paul*, Paris, 1924, i. pp. 352 ff, ii. 341. On the general questions raised by the Colossian heresy, cf. in addition, W. L. Knox, *St. Paul and the Church of the Gentiles*, Cambridge, 1939, pp. 112–166; S. Hanson, *The Unity of the Church in the New Testament*, Upsala, 1946; pp. 22, 123–129; G. Bornkamm, Die Häresie des Kolosserbriefes, in *Theol. Litterarzeitung*, 1948, col. 11 ff; and particularly, E. Percy, *Die Probleme der Kolosser und Epheserbriefe*, Lund, 1946, passim. Cf. also n. 26, infra, p. 206.

[18] *Die Hellenistische Mysterienreligionen*, 3rd. Ed. Leipzig, 1927, p. 7. On 'pleroma', Cf. *Poimandres*, Leipzig, 1904, p. 25. n. 1.

[19] Cf. Moulton & Milligan, *Vocabulary of the N.T.*, s.v. This seems to lie behind the sense which rendered the gnostic Pleroma such an easy target for Tertullian's satire. Cf. adv. Val. 8, 12.

[20] Ed. Nock-Festugière, Paris, 1945. Whatever the precise relation between the Hermetic and gnostic writings, we now know that, at any rate, gnostic sects like the owners of the Nag Hammadi library, liked to read writings of

the same milieu and perhaps from much the same period, we read of the cosmos being filled with breath or spirit: *spiritus, quo plena sunt omnia, permixtus cunctis cuncta uiuificat* ... (*Ascl.* 6). This is the source of the unity and coherence of the universe, conceived on the analogy of an organism. Again, it is this breath or spirit that moves and directs the functioning of everything in the world. It is given to each thing according to its nature, *ut cujusque naturae qualitas est* (*Ascl.* 17). As for a void, 'of which many have made so much', this is something inconceivable and impossible in this scheme of things, for 'all the parts of the world are absolutely full, just as the world itself is full and a completely achieved whole consisting of bodies diverse in form and quality ...' (*Ascl.* 33). The world's fulness of divinity, or of some attribute of divinity singled out, is simply its participation as a hierarchical system in the One which is also the All. 'God is the soul *(ψυχή)* of eternity *(αἰών)*, eternity that of the cosmos, heaven that of the earth. And God is in the mind *(νοῦς)*, the mind in the soul and the soul in matter ... And all this body, wherein are all other bodies, is filled by soul full of mind and of God ...' (*C. Herm.* XI. 4). 'For all things are full of God; and there can be no inactivity anywhere in or out of the world. Fore inactivity is a word without meaning *(ἀργία γὰρ ὄνομα κενὸν ἔστι)*, both with regard to agent and to product.' (XI. 5). This is the cosmological picture—and, after all, it is a commonplace of Greek philosophical reflection—which lies behind the phrase 'the pleroma of all things': 'The pleroma of all is both one and in one; not as if the one could double itself, but because both these (container and contained) are one ... and if anyone should try to ... sever the all from the one, by taking the word 'all' to stand for a plurality *(πλῆθος)* and not for a pleroma, he would thereby, detaching the all from the one, destroy the all—an impossibility. All things then must be one ... lest the pleroma be dissolved.' (*C. Herm.* XVI. 3). In the same vein, this cosmos is said to be 'a great god, the image of a yet greater one', to which it is united and by which its order is preserved; it is 'the pleroma of

---

that sort. The collection contains a Coptic version of the *Asclepius*, and three further treatises apparently related to the Hermetica (No. 42–46); cf. Puech, *loc. cit.*, p. 143.

life' and no part of it can ever be devoid of life, (*C. Herm.* XII. 15) nor can there be another such pleroma of life. (*C. Herm.* IX. 7) [21] In all these passages 'pleroma of life' and similar phrases denote the whole cosmic totality in so far as it is alive, that is to say, in so far as it is filled with spirit or divinity. The 'pleroma' is that which is filled or completed, not that which fills (as Dupont, *op. cit.* p. 468, has shown).

There is another context in which we find the filler-filled picture utilised in the Hermetic writings, which is noteworthy, not for any further light on the technical sense of 'pleroma', but for its affinity with the atmosphere of gnosticism. In one of the most remarkable of these passages the origin of our concepts is correlated with the seeds sown in the mind: if these are from God, they are good, if from the demons, evil.[22] 'But the seeds from God, though few in number, are great and beautiful and good: they are virtue, temperance and piety *(εὐσέβεια)*. Piety, however, is the knowledge of God *(γνῶσις θεοῦ)*, and one who knows him, being filled with all good, has his thoughts from God himself, not as the common herd.' (*C. Herm.* IX. 4). The theme of praising God for 'filling' the initiate with the 'things sought or desired', revelations, or gnosis, is a common one in these writings.[23]

When one turns from here to gnostic mythology, one is at first sight baffled by the difference of language. For the most part, when we hear of a 'Pleroma' there, we are being told about a world of archetypal ideas. It certainly is a totality and an organised whole; but it is a 'fulness' without our being given to understand what it is a fulness of, what the principle of its coherence and unity is. This is something which seems to be taken for granted most of the time and only appears sporadically.[24] Let us note first of all the

[21] In *C. Herm.* VI. 4 the cosmos is called a 'pleroma of evil' over against god, the pleroma of good; or good, the pleroma of god. This, as Festugière points out in his note on this passage, (p. 76–77, n. 17), is the blasphemy condemned by the author of IX. 4.

[22] It is worth comparing *C. Herm.* IX. 3 with Valentine's frag. 2, and IX. 4. with the passage from the Gospel of Truth quoted by Puech & Quispel, *loc. cit.*, p. 35. Cf. infra, p. 206. n. 26.

[23] Cf. *Poimandres*, 30 — explicitated by 3, 24; also *C. Herm.* X. 4.

[24] Thus Sagnard (*La Gnose* . . ., p. 564) lists 'pleroma' among special

characteristic echoes of Scriptural turns of phrase which we find, here as elsewhere in gnostic mythology: 'fulness of Joy' (*Exc. Theod.* 65. 2),[25] and the notorious gnostic utilisation of St. Paul's language describing the fulness of the godhead dwelling in Christ. (AH I. 3. 4; *Exc. Theod.* 38). We hear also of a 'pleroma of Aeons' (AH I. 2. 6; II. 12. 7; IV. 33. 3, etc); more revealing phrases are those which speak of a 'pleroma of light' which is set over against a shadow or absence of light, a 'kenoma' (Cf. e.g. AH I. 4. 1; II. 4; 8. 2; III. 25. 6). Finally, the Pleroma is above all a 'fulness of gnosis' over against a 'kenoma of gnosis' (Cf. e.g. AH II. 4. 2; 5. 2; III. 25. 6; IV. 35. 2).

It seems to be the *Excerpts from Theodotus*, representing the Eastern development of Valentinian teaching, that give us most light on why the divine world of the gnostic myth should be called the Pleroma. It is here that we find the bi-polar character of wholeness stressed most strongly. Wholeness is conceived in sexual terms—completion requires the coming together of a couple, a *συζυγία*. Each pair of Aeons constituting the Pleroma is a male-

---

gnostic technical terms, without relating it to the philosophical vocabulary of the Hermetica. Baynes (*A Coptic Gnostic Treatise*, Cambridge, 1933, pp. 17—18, n. 1) similarly writes: 'As employed by gnostics, this term denotes two principal ideas. Collectively, it represents the fulness of the divine perfections and attributes, thus standing in sharp contrast, as a positive conception, to the negative, ineffable aspect of the Deity of which the human mind can form no definite notion. Secondly, it stands for the ideal world, the perfect archetype and pattern hidden in Heaven, of which all subsequent phenomenal manifestation is an imperfect copy.' A. D. Nock (Early Gentile Christianity and its Hellenistic background, in *Essays on the Trinity and the Incarnation*, ed. A. E. J. Rawlinson, London, 1928, p. 101. n. 3): 'It does not seem to me that *πληρώμα* can be regarded as a technical term *of religion* till its use by the Christian gnostics.' (my emphasis). With this qualification which I have emphasised, I should accept the views expressed by these writers. I should want, however, to stress the need for interpreting the technical religious sense of the word in the light of the meaning it bears in the technical vocabulary of philosophical reflection, which, to my knowledge, no writer on gnosticism has done. As I hope to show in the sequel, this adds to our understanding of the coherence of the gnostic myth, and particularly of its soteriological aspects.

[25] If père Sagnard is right — as he seems to me to be — it must be admitted that this cannot be directly identified with *the* Pleroma. Cf. *La Gnose . . .*, pp. 536—537 and *Les Extraits de Théodote*, SC, p. 189. n. 1.

female pair, and constitutes a sort of subordiante pleroma. The Pleroma is also spoken of as the Whole *(ὅλον)* and the pleromata as the wholes (Cf. *Exc. Theod.* 30.2; 31.1, 2; 32.1, 2, 3; 33. 3, etc). 'In the Pleroma, then', we are told, 'where there is unity, each Aeon has its own pleroma, in its couple. All that proceeds from a couple, are pleromata; whereas what proceeds from one alone, are images' (*εἰκόνες* — *Exc. Theod.* 32. 1). We are here, I think, very near the roots of Valentinian cosmology. The fulness of being, completeness and wholeness of the divine world is expressed by the image of couples constituting a complete being (or of a hermaphroditic being) generating further such couples. We remain within the world of achieved perfection until by a fault within this world, a single, incomplete constituent produces offspring also lacking in wholeness, and consequently excluded from the Pleroma, though reflecting the world within it. This seems to be identical with the teaching of a fragment of Valentine (Völker, fr. 5, p. 59; Förster and Sagnard: fr. 4b). It looks as if Theodotus had here preserved for us his master's teaching, laying greater stress on the cosmological note of the myth than either he, or his disciples in the West seem to have done. At any rate, both with Valentine and with Theodotus, we are very close to the world of the Hermetic writings. We are not to hope, we are told in a passage of the latter, 'that the maker of the majesty of the All, the father and lord of all things, should be nameable by a single name, however complex . . . He, being both one and all, is completely full of the fertility of the sexes, and eternally pregnant with his will generates all that he wills.' (*utraque sexus fecunditate plenissimus semper voluntatis praegnans suae parit semper . . . Ascl.* 20).

This is one of the points at which the Valentinian myth reveals itself as inscribed into a cosmological scheme, of which we have already observed the outlines in the Hermetic writings. Here we find them again in the Valentinian cosmology—with the significant difference that the coherent, unified whole of the Pleroma is now placed over against a kenoma or emptiness, which is, nonetheless, derived from the Pleroma and reflects it as an image reflects its original. This, in addition to its obviously Platonic overtones, marks, as Irenaeus observes, a return from the stoic rejection of a void to the atomists' distinction between a fulness and a void.

(Cf. AH. II. 14. 3). All that is within the Pleroma is fundamentally (i.e. in respect of gnosis) homogeneous in nature. Likewise, anything that shares this nature, though it be in some sense, outside the Pleroma, is destined ultimately to re-enter it. Such, of course, is the banished Sophia and the spiritual seed sown by her into the world under the dominion of the Demiurge. The seed is part of her affinity with the nature of the Pleroma, being begotten in her by the sight of the angels who, according to the myth, accompany the Saviour on his mission to heal her sufferings. (Cf. AH I. 4. 5). The cosmology of salvation based on this, expounded at length in the *Excerpts of Theodotus*, does not seem to differ fundamentally from that hinted at by other Valentinian sources. A cursory glance at their eschatological doctrines is enough to show that the pattern of salvation for the individual gnostic elect follows exactly the pattern of the unity and wholeness of the Pleroma. The readmission of the seed into the Pleroma is by union of each with its angelic partner: the human seed being the feminine counter-parts of the masculine angel-satellites of the Saviour. Thus a gnostic commentary on the story of the Samaritan woman in the Fourth Gospel explains Christ's injunction to the woman thus: 'Christ had told her to call, not her husband in this world, for he knew that she had no legitimate husband . . .' He was referring to her husband 'in the Aeon', that is to say, to her 'consort from the Pleroma' *(τοῦ ἀπὸ τοῦ πληρώματος σύζυγον)*, her own pleroma *(τὸ πληρώμα αὐτῆς)* (Heracleon, Fr. 18 Völker, p. 72). The gnostic's salvation, the fulfilment of the seed, is a marriage and a home-coming with the consort. Being 'at home' in the realm of light *(οἰκειότητα ἔχει πρὸς τὸ φῶς — Exc. Theod.* 41.2), in the Pleroma, the spiritual seed is saved by nature *(φύσει σῳζόμενον — Exc. Theod.* 56. 3). Their final entry into the Pleroma as completed couples is each partner's own fulfilment by his or her own pleroma. The angelic consorts are thus imcomplete without their human partners scattered in the world who constitute the elect. 'One might almost say', as one of these excerpts says explicitly, 'that they need us (the elect) for their own entry' (*Exc. Theod.* 35, 3, 4). The pleromata are not completed wholes until their final re-union; and the inevitable suggestion is that likewise, the final completion of the Pleroma as an achieved totality takes place only with the eschatological re-entry of the banished

Sophia with her seed into the marriage-chamber, the Pleroma. (*Exc. Theod.* 21, 22, 35, 36, 41, 67, 68, 79). The ritual which Irenaeus describes the gnostic magician Mark as performing is a ritual enactment precisely of this myth. Emptying the contents of the initiate's consecrated cup into his own—wherein, by magical trickery he causes it to grow in volume—he pronounces these words: 'may that Charis (one of the feminine Aeons, i.e. one of the names of the Pleroma in the feminine line) who is before all things and who is beyond knowledge and beyond words fill your inner man and multiply in you her gnosis . . .' (AH I. 13. 2)—a ritual which culminates, as Irenaeus' account goes on to inform us, in a sacred marriage 'symbolising the heavenly conjunctions' (*πνευματικὸν | γάμον. . . κατὰ τὴν ὁμοιότητα τῶν ἄνω συζυγιῶν* AH I. 21. 3). The bridal myth is at the very heart of gnosticism; 'wherefore,' Irenaeus writes, 'they always have to be meditating on the mystery of the conjunction' (AH I. 6. 4). 'We (the ordinary Christians), they say, rece e grace for use, as a gift to be taken back again; whereas they possess it as their own *(ἰδιόκτητον)*, descending from the ineffable and unnameable conjunction from above . . .' (*ibid.*) The Nag Hammadi Epistle of James likens the Apostles to the elect: 'by the "faith of gnosis" they possess life without fear of deprivation . . .' and not even God himself can take it from them. (Cf. Puech & Quispel, *loc. cit.*, p. 15). Gnosis, then, is saving knowledge as well as knowledge of being saved. For, fundamentally, the Valentinian's salvation is by nature: the divided and scattered spiritual seed has a nostalgic longing for what it knows as its Home. The completion of the spiritual man by his consort from above, re-enacts in the multiplicity of pleromata the eschatological marriage of Sophia with the Christ of *the* Pleroma. The gnosis which at once shows him the way and gives him the assurance of this return, is one of the expressions of the community of nature which makes it, not only possible, but inevitable. For the Pleroma is a fulness of gnosis, and the kenoma an absence of it. The implanted affinity for the Pleroma in the elect must include a sharing in its gnosis. It is difficult to assess the exact place of membership of the sect, acceptance of its teaching and performance of its ritual, and, above all, of magic, in the gnostic redemption theories. Irenaeus was certainly aware of a good deal of variety

of opinion on this question (AH I. 21. 4). At any rate, there can be little doubt that those whom he describes as holding 'that gnosis of the ineffable greatness is by itself perfect redemption' (*ibid.*) expressed the central exigencies of gnostic teaching. For to say that salvation is by gnosis is to say the same thing as it is to say that salvation is by nature. The saving knowledge reveals to the gnostic initiate the archetypal Anthropos of the Pleroma, and himself as the microcosm in which the whole drama of the Pleroma is reflected. (AH I. 18. 1) But the saving revelation is vouchsafed to those, and only those, who have this participation of nature implanted.[26] Acceptance of the saving revelation embodied in the sect's teaching and life manifests the community of nature, rejection manifests its absence. The elect's position in the world, whether it is looked at from the point of view of his nature or that of his gnosis, is that of an outpost of the Pleroma in a world in which he is not at home, but from which his deliverance is assured.

One of the foremost scholars of Gnosticism, Professor Quispel has seen in the Valentinian myth an uncompromising statement of a doctrine of salvation by grace and election (Cf. *art. cit.*, *Eranos Jahrbuch*, 1947). I cannot do justice to his argument here; indeed, under the guise of describing the gnostic soteriology as a salvation-physics, I have come very near to stating what might amount to either the same thing, or to something diametrically opposed. The question can, I think, best be stated in this way: granted that the spiritual seed is saved, and saved on account of 'spirit' belonging by right to the world of salvation: can this salvation be described as a gift? Clearly, if the 'spiritual seed' were something sown in a man, much in the same way as we speak of 'grace being given', in virtue of which man is saved, the two descriptions might reasonably

[26] The newly discovered Gospel of Truth in the 'Codex Jung' contains striking confirmation of this: Those who have received the esoteric instruction, it tells us, are the elect known of the Father. 'Thereby, he who knows, is a being from on high . . . Having gnosis, he does the will of him who has called him, and his desire is to please the Father. He receives rest . . . He who has this knowledge knows whence he has come and where he is destined to go; he knows, like unto a man delivered and awaking from drunkenness, where he has been, and returns unto himself . . .' Quoted by Puech & Quispel, *loc. cit.*, pp. 34–35.

be interpreted as equivalent. Unfortunately, the sources available to us do not tell us very clearly at what point in his career the seed is implanted in a man. The key passage is that in which Irenaeus describes the destinies of three sorts of men in the Ptolemaean myth:

> They (these disciples) conceive of three kinds of men: spiritual, material, and animal, represented by Cain, Abel and Seth. These three natures are no longer united in a single individual (as they were in Adam), but are divided into three races. The material goes into corruption, the animal – if it has chosen the better part – will find its rest in the Intermediate place; but if it has chosen the worse, it too, shall share the lot of the material, unto which it has made itself like. The spiritual, however, which Sophia (Achamoth) has been sowing since the beginning even until now into just souls, are educated and nourished here below, since they had been sent immature (*νήπια ἐκπεπέμφθαι*). Eventually, having become worthy of perfection, they shall be given as brides to the angels of the Saviour. As for their souls, they must [27] of necessity, rest in the Intermediate place with the Demiurge for ever. Souls (reading, as Harvey suggests, i. 66. n.l, *ψυχάς*) themselves they again subdivide into a class of those which are good by nature and one of those which are bad by nature. The good are those which are made capable of receiving the seed (*τὰς δεκτικὰς τοῦ σπέρματος γινομένας*), those by nature evil can in no way receive that seed.
>
> (AH I. 7. 5)

This passage raises too many problems to be solved here. Let me confine myself to the following two: (i) Do the words 'which Sophia has been sowing since the beginning even until now into just souls' entitle us to conclude that the spiritual seed is sown, as a saving gift, into souls which have proved themselves just? And (ii), If so, does the further subdivision of souls into the good and bad by nature allow us to maintain the possibility of a free choice as the pre-requisite of the gift?

(i) There is no evidence known to me which would enable us to say whether the 'sowing' of the spiritual seed is conceived as taking place in the process of the creation of each 'just soul', or at some subsequent moment of its career. Only in the latter case could we argue to justification being, in any real sense, a gift. In the former case, there being no recipient already available, it makes no sense to speak of 'it' being given anything. The questions of election and of predestination do not, of course, admit of such an easy answer.

[27] Since it is axiomatic that 'nothing of "animal" nature shall enter the Pleroma' – AH I. 7. 1.

The *Excerpts of Theodotus* 2, 53–57 have in mind the insertion of the seed in Adam and its transmission to the race of the elect. These – as indeed the bulk of the material I have drawn on – come from the sections which do not, as a whole, reflect the teaching of Ptolemy in detail. Obscure as their relation to this is, and obscure as their anthropology in particular (as Quispel comments, *loc. cit.*, p. 272) appears, on this question, nevertheless, the Excerpts leave little room for doubt. It seems to me quite inconceivable, however, that the Eastern and Western schools of Valentine's disciples should have come to hold, within little more than a generation, views so divergent on a question as central to the nature and aim of gnosis as this is.

(ii) In general, to deny the possibility of free choice given to all souls would go very much against the grain of the Valentinian system. Whether men can be created as belonging to the bottom class, or whether they are created in the ambiguous state in which the choice between middle and bottom class is left to themselves, is not quite clear. (It might also well be that their turning downwards does not identify them with the 'material' substance entirely.) Sometimes, so far as men are concerned, 'material' (= earthy) and 'animal' (= psychical) appear to be ethical categories rather than physical. Are we here being given to understand that these two are indeed distinct natures, and only the second is capable of receiving the seed? To answer this question it must be remembered that the phrase discussed in (i) referred to 'just souls' (following the Greek; the Latin omits the phrase altogether), whereas the present one concerns 'good' as opposed to evil. Ptolemy's *Letter to Flora* should put us on our guard against identifying the 'just' with the 'good'; the former belongs to the realm of the Law, under the Demiurge; the latter transcends this, and belongs to the Perfect Father, the one who alone is good. The difficulty with interpreting the passage in this sense, however, is that it speaks of 'souls', which very definitely belong to the order of the Demiurge and his justice. I cannot with any confidence interpret this baffling passage; I would hazard the suggestion that it might be paraphrased thus: Souls, though not capable of being called 'good' in the strict Ptolemaean acceptance of the word, can be so called in so far as they contain the spiritual seed, which is good by nature. In this case *δεκτικάς* would have to

be translated as 'receptive' in a sense such as to exclude the possibility of non-reception, so that the sentence will assert the tautology that the 'good' souls are those which have received the seed; and the bad are incapable of receiving the seed. Nothing is said about the intermediate 'just', but if this interpretation is correct, we should have to say that together with the bad by nature they are 'unreceptive' of the seed in the sense that they simply have not as a matter of fact been given it. Free though they may be to choose or to reject 'justice', this choice cannot, in the absence of a spiritual seed, effect their final entry into the Pleroma. In any case, we are in no better position towards answering the first question.

Irenaeus certainly interpreted the teaching of this passage as affirming, on the one hand, an inevitable salvation by nature for the spiritual seed, and, on the other, a free choice as determining the lot of 'souls'. For in this divergence he sees an instance of the inconsistencies in gnostic teaching which he is so fond of detecting. Thus he asks why, if the spiritual seed is saved by nature and the earthy substance destroyed by nature, the psychic should not be destined to its final resting place outside the Pleroma by *its* nature? In relation to the other two classes of men (= kinds of substance) their moral self-specification in nature and destiny constitute an anomaly in Irenaeus's view. (AH II. 29. 3).

Was Irenaeus's interpretation of the teaching he thus criticises, taking the myth, perhaps rather too philosophically, correct? If an examination of the passage in which this teaching is given most explicitly has not helped us, is there any other consideration to incline us in favour of or against the view that the Valentinian system taught a doctrine of salvation by nature?

I think it is worth recalling that the passage from Irenaeus gave us the doctrine not of Valentine, but of Ptolemy, his Roman disciple in the following generation.[28] It is acknowledged on all hands [29] that Ptolemy departs from his master's teaching above all

---

[28] Père Sagnard's conclusion with regard to this seems incontrovertible. Cf. *La Gnose* . . ., c. V.

[29] Cf. particularly, Sagnard, *La Gnose* . . ., pp. 230–231, 306–307, 320; also the analysis of Ptolemy's Letter to Flora by Quispel in his edition, SC. Parallels between his expressions and expressions from undoubtedly orthodox sources have often been stressed (cf. infra, p. 223 n. 47), and some of his

by moulding his language with a view to being as inoffensive to Christian ears as possible. If this passage is an accurate account of his teaching on salvation, it seems to me characteristically phrased in ambiguous phraseology, designed to be capable of claiming Christian assent and opening, at the same time, into radically non-Christian perspectives.

If, then, we take this as our justification for interpreting Valentinian soteriology *ex convenientia*, appealing to what would 'fit' the prevailing trends of its context best, I think there is a great deal to favour the view that salvation for the gnostic elect is a matter of nature. They are not only inevitably saved on account of their possession of the spiritual seed: they are saved by right, in virtue of the spiritual nature which belongs to them and them only. For the three races of men in the myth are thought of as genera in a very precise sense: the stress is always laid on their externality to each other. We cannot, in the last resort, speak of a seed *in* man, or given to him. What we have to do with, is 'a man in man . . . the animal in the earthy, not as a part added to a part, but as a whole added to a whole *(οὐ μέρει μέρος· ἀλλὰ ὅλῳ ὅλος συνών)* by the inexpressible power of God' (*Exc. Theod.* 51. 1). Or, to put it the way Basilides put it,[30] we may reserve the title of 'man', in its most real sense, to the elect and deny it to all others. But even if we do not go to such lengths, in the final sorting out of destinies—in which Irenaeus sees an application of the Stoic separation of the elements and the return of each to that with which it is homogeneous in nature (with his reservation concerning the anomaly of the moral self-specification allowed the intermediate nature, cf. supra, p. 209) (AH II. 14. 4)—their temporary existence in a mixed state is brought to an end. The lowest is destroyed, the intermediate shed like a garment at the threshold of the Pleroma, while the naked spirit

New Testament exegesis has been described as of a kind of which a modern exegete might justly be proud. Cf. C. Barth, *Die Interpretation des Neuen Testaments in der valentinianischen Gnosis, Texte und Untersuchungen*, XXXVII. 3 (1911) p. 103.

[30] Basilides in many ways, represents a line of thought divergent from the Valentinian tradition found in Ptolemy, Theodotus, Heracleon and the Markosians — which is what I have, throughout, primarily in view. On Basilides, Cf. G. Quispel, L'Homme gnostique — La doctrine de Basilide, in *Eranos Jahrbuch* 1948, pp. 89—139.

alone proceeds into the marriage-chamber. This is a reversal of the process of being clothed in successive layers of substance in the course of the descent from the Pleroma of the corresponding Christology (cf. AH I. 6. 1; 7. 2; III. 16. 1), in which Père Sagnard has discerned one of the 'great laws of gnosis' (*La Gnose* . . . c. VI). The one thing that is clear is that we cannot here speak of a 'man', a being with sufficient degree of wholeness and unity, to allow us to speak of him as the recipient of a gift. There is no giving and receiving, but a superimposition of strata on substrata. The cost of possessing the 'gift'—if we can speak of a 'gift' at all—is to disown all that we should call human: when you've shed body and soul, Irenaeus asks, 'what is there left to enter the Pleroma?' (AH II. 29. 3). The only thing that is saved, is the 'gift' itself, the 'inner' or spiritual man—and saved by its spiritual nature. All that goes to make up the 'recipient' of the 'gift', is in the last resort foreign to it and incapable of assimilating it. To speak of a gratuitous salvation by gift and election here seems to me to strain the language of giving and receiving to breaking-point.

We are now in a position to appreciate both the decisiveness of Irenaeus's critique, its bearings, and the scope it leaves for assimilation. Book II of the *Adversus Haereses* opens with a somewhat lengthy and repetitive polemic against the gnostic cosmology. Its aim, as Irenaeus sums it up in Chapter 9, is to show that the God of the Scriptures, the creator and ruler of the world is the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, and that there is no other God beside him. The fulcrum of his argumentation throughout this book is the distinction between the pleroma and the kenoma—the very *raison d'être* of the gnostic myth. There is no room for two worlds, any more than there is for two Gods, for a cosmos and an *Αἰών*, of a world of history and a timeless world of spirit. For God in his infinity contains all things: if there were anything beyond his immensity, 'he would not be the pleroma of all things', and would be limited by what fell outside him and be contained in a more inclusive Pleroma. (AH II. 1, 2, 3). Nor can there be any vacuity within him, and there can be nothing in the cosmos removed beyond the realm accessible to him and under his dominion (AH II. 13, 5, 7) and his light must reach the remotest depths of his creation (AH III. 11. 1;

IV. 19. 3; 20. 1), or he could not be the pleroma of all things (AH II. 8. 2; 4. 3). Any attempt, like the gnostics', to sever a perfect and complete world outside and beyond history from this world which derives from it as the product of a defection in it, involves imperfection and defect within the Pleroma itself. (AH II. 4. 2, 3).

Such are the lines of Irenaeus's argumentation. The upshot of it all may be summarised in saying that what he opposes to the gnostics is a single world full of God's glory and one God who contains it all and governs its history by his providence (AH III. 25). What he attacks unceasingly is the division which the gnostic myth imports into this cosmology between two worlds, one of which has its temporary outposts, eventually to be re-admitted, in the other, which is alien to it. (Cf. IV. 19. 2, 3).

Irenaeus himself, admittedly, has little to say about a 'pleroma', and, indeed, hardly uses the word except in speaking of or alluding to the gnostic conception. The word had, presumably, become too much of a gnostic technical term by now. He does, however, use the word *πληροῦν* or its Latin equivalent, *implere*, and their cognates; and the way he uses them repays study. Let us examine four passages of particular interest.

(1) Speaking of the prophets' prefiguring the things to be done by Christ, he writes thus: 'Insomuch as they, too, were members of Christ, each of them, according to the place befitting him as that particular member, set forth the appropriate prophecy. Thus all of them, though many, prefigure (*praeformantes*) and announce what pertains to one . . . Each of them thus fulfilled the dispensation according to the special place held by each as a member (*secundum quod erat membrum secundum hoc et dispensationem adimplebat*— AH IV. 33. 10). Let us note the phrase *dispensationem adimplere*, (*= τὴν οἰκονομίαν ἀναπληροῦν* or *ἐκπληροῦν*) variants of which occur elsewhere.[31] For the idea of an 'economy of the pleroma' is a characteristic notion of the cosmology of the Hermetica, which we have seen to lie behind the gnostic myth. The title, for instance, of a section in the sixteenth treatise of the *Corpus Hermeticum*, *περὶ οἰκονομίας τοῦ πληρώματος* [32] is expounded in a section from

[31] Cf. *τὴν οἰκονομίαν ἐκπληρώσαντος*, AH III. 17. 4; also IV. 21. 3.

[32] Cf. *περὶ τῆς ὅλης* (= *πληρώματος*) *οἰκονομίαν* in Stobaei Hermetica,

which I have already quoted at some length. (XIV. 3. cf *supra*, p. 9). It describes the hierarchical arrangement of the cosmos, dependent on the Father, the one who is all and contains all, and 'fills' each component of the hierarchy according to the measure of its nature. We encounter the same language in the *Asclepius* (29, 30): God is there said to 'dispense' eternally the fulness of life with which the universe is filled, in a continual yet single and eternal 'dispensation'. *Dispensatio* or *οἰκονομία* in the Hermetica, stands, of course, for the ordering of the world's manifold variety in a hierarchical scheme, every level of which shares in the divine life which fills it according to its capacity.

The contrast with Irenaeus's language lies not merely in his turning the phrase inside out: 'the dispensation of the pleroma'—'the fulfilling of the dispensation'. The inversion marks a very different conception of the divine economy or dispensation, a conception which is very dear to him, one to which he returns time and again. It is the Biblical conception of the unfolding of God's plan for the creation, and particularly for man's redemption, in history. Man being inherently temporal, has to travel gradually towards God (AH IV. 11. 2), who is not subject to time. All God's dealings with men throughout history are a process of 'accustoming men to bear his Spirit and have communion with God'; and thus, in his magnificent phrase, Irenaeus sums up the Old Testament history as God's work of 'adjusting the human race, in manifold ways, to harmony with salvation' (AH IV. 14. 2; Cf. IV. 38. 1, 3; 39. 2; 21. 3). God does nothing 'out of due time and unfittingly' (AH III. 16. 7; Cf. IV. 4. 2 etc)—everything, with him, is *apto tempore*, in its own *kairos*, the moment assigned to it in the unfolding of his plan. According to this plan or economy, the Word as the Father's steward brings forth his treasure for men (AH IV. 9. 1). Heresy—and let us recall that for Irenaeus this meant what we should call 'gnosticism',[33]—consists simply in 'ignoring God's

---

Exc. xiv., in Scott, *Hermetica*, i. p. 436; cf. ibid., Exc. xxiii (*Kore Kosmou*), p. 466.

[33] I am using the word in the traditional sense to include the kinds of heresies described by Irenaeus. On the vexed question of whom Irenaeus calls 'gnostics' and who called themselves 'gnostics', cf. the survey of the debate in Sagnard, *La Gnose* . . ., pp. 81—82, 446.

dispensation', in rejecting the historical provision he has made for men's salvation (AH V. 19. 2. Cf. III. 12. 2; 16. 8; IV. 27. 2; 29. 1, 2; 35. 2)—and in particular, rejection of the passion and contempt of martyrdom, the *dispensatio passionis* (AH III. 18. 5). Thus the prophets and patriarchs, in fulfilling the 'dispensations' allotted to them, prefigure and herald the final fulfilment of God's plan. Their actions are not *inanes, sed plena dispositionum* (AH IV.21.3), because they prefigure or predict the fulfilment of the whole dispensation in Christ, who came in his flesh, in the fulness of time 'coming through the whole dispensation to recapitulate it, sum it up, or gather it all together in himself' (AH III. 16. 8).[34] In so doing, he has 'consummated the dispensation of our salvation' (AH III. 18. 2. Cf. 23. 1, etc.).

Involved in this conception of the divine economy is a conception of a divine *paedagogia* no less different from the gnostic conception. The Valentinian myth, too, we recall, has an important place for 'education'. We saw in a passage already quoted (AH I. 7. 5, supra, p. 17), that the spiritual seed is sent into the world 'immature', and in need of education and nourishment until it is fitted to be given in marriage to its angelic consort and ready for re-admission to its home in the Pleroma.[35] It goes without question that the picture here is simply a part of the pattern of wholeness-fall-exclusion-healing-return home which the gnostic myth displays on all levels. Admittedly, there is a further element involved: 'The spiritual element', so the Ptolemaean teaching tells us, 'has been sent into this world in order that it receive its formation conjoined to the animal substance *(τῷ ψυχικῷ συζυγὲν μορφωθῇ)*, being co-educated with it in their mutual commerce *(συμπαιδευθὲν αὐτῷ ἐν τῇ ἀναστροφῇ)*. And this spiritual substance, they say, is the salt of the earth and the light of the world, since the animal

[34] The concept of *ἀνακεφαλαίωσις* (which my string of synonyms is meant to translate), has been exhaustively treated. Cf.: d'Ales, La doctrine de la récapitulation en saint Irenée, in *Rech. de Sc. Rel.* VI (1916), pp. 185–211; G. Aulén, *Christus Victor, E. Tr.*, London, 1931, pp. 34–38; J. Lawson, *The Biblical Theology of St. Irenaeus*, (London, 1948) pp. 140–198; R. Potter, o. p., Irenaeus and 'Recapitulation', in *Dom. St.* IV. (1951), pp. 192–200. I am also indebted to an unpublished thesis on this subject by fr. Stanislaus Parker, o. p. Cf. also, Kittel, *Theol. Wörterbuch*, III. 681 ff.

[35] Cf. AH. I. 5. 6; 6. 4; II. 19. 4.

substance too stands in need of an education of the sensible order.' (AH I. 6. 1)[36] If this reading of this doubtful text is right—and it seems to me to be in line with the general tendency of gnostic teaching—there can be no question of the spiritual seed standing in need of involvement with the world of the *ψυχικοί* for its education. On the contrary, it is that world which needs the presence of the *πνευματικοί*. Not as if there could be any question of it being saved together with the elect, or receive 'perfect gnosis' (AH I. 6. 2); but its own, purely relative salvation outside the Pleroma is by faith and works, and hence it stands in need of instruction. The elect's salvation being by nature and not requiring works (AH I. 6. 4), the seed only has to be 'perfected'. The process of growth involved is a progressive 'formation in gnosis' *(μόρφωσις κατὰ γνῶσιν)*, which culminates in perfect gnosis (AH II. 19, 1, 3). This is an instance of the 'formation of the feminine by the masculine' basic to the Valentinian cosmology (Cf. Hippolytus, *Ref.* VI. 30). If this process, conceived, as it is, in cosmological terms, can be called an 'education' in any real sense, let us note, at any rate, that it consists precisely in a loosening of the bond between the spiritual seed and the historical reality with which it is, for the time being, involved.

The contrast with a divine educative history as conceived by Irenaeus could hardly be sharper. 'God made temporal things for the sake of man, that by their means he might grow to maturity . . .' (AH IV. 5. 1. Cf. IV. 37. 7; 39. 2). In their midst, the Word prepared men by the Law for the fulness of freedom which he was to bring them by fulfilling the Law in his own humanity (AH IV. 13. 3). In the tension between the redemption fulfilled in Christ and men's possession of it in hope, no place is left for the gnostic's nostalgia for a home in another world, and his malaise about involvement in this. (AH IV. 38, 39) The Christian's fulfilment is to achieve integrity and freedom in responsible acceptance of what the gnostic disowns as something alien. The contrast between the two conceptions of education and maturity throws into relief that between the corresponding notions of the divine economy.

[36] On the much controverted reading of this text, cf. Sagnard, *La Gnose* . . ., pp. 397–398. I have followed the emendation of *τῶν ψυχικῶν* to *τῷ ψυχικῷ* born out by the Latin text and defended by Sagnard.

The examination of this first passage in which Irenaeus speaks of a 'fulfilment' has led us into an excursus into a consideration of some of the ideas at the heart of his theology, such as the idea of history as a divine educative process, a 'dispensation' which culminates in the recapitulation of all that has gone before in Christ. Let us turn now to the second passage.

(2) The prophets and servants of Christ who have predicted and prefigured the manner of his coming, have, by so doing, 'fulfilled the dispensations' assigned to them. Irenaeus now explains that this is shown by the fact that Christ 'fulfilled their words', in 'coming such as he had been announced'.[37] Then, quoting Matt. 5. 17–18 ('I came not to destroy but to fulfil . . .'), he goes on: 'For in his coming he has fulfilled all, and goes on fulfilling in the Church, until the final consummation, the New Testament predicted by the Law.' (AH IV. 34. 2) This simple and Biblical language hides a subtle complexity of thought. For natural and Scriptural as it is to speak of the 'fulfilment' of the Old Testament promises and prophecies by Christ in the New, a comparison with a multitude of similar passages to be found in St. Justin's works will show that Irenaeus is curiously careful and deliberate in his choice of words here. For the theme of the 'fulfilment' of the Law and the prophecies had been the very centre and substance of Justin's *Dialogue with Trypho the Jew*, and indeed, had also formed an important part of his apologetics intended for gentiles. There is continual talk of the things promised or predicted 'being done', 'coming about', or of a 'dispensation being accomplished';[38] but I have found not a single

---

[37] For almost identical expressions, cf. AH. IV. 23. 1; 24. 2.

[38] Cf. I. *Apol.* 31, 32, 33, 34, 35; *Dial.* 41, 42, 51, 53, 101, 104, 110, 115, 139. The following passages merit special mention for the contrast they offer to Irenaeus's usage: (1) *Dial.* 67 speaks of Christs' fulfilling the Law not for his own justification, but as *τὴν οἰκονομίαν ἀπαρτίζων, ἣν ἠθελεν ὁ πατὴρ.* (2) *Dial.* 141 speaks of the patriarchs' actions as done in order that by them *οἰκονομία τις καὶ μυστήρια πάντα δι' αὐτῶν ἀποτελεῖτο. . .* This usage is identical with that which recurs repeatedly in *Dial.* 107 and 134. It survives in Irenaeus in the Greek fragment of AH. IV. 31. 1. (—the only passage from Irenaeus quoted by Canon Prestige in his study of 'economy' in *God and Patristic Thought*, c. 3.). This latter is clearly very much like a technical vocabulary for Justin: this renders Irenaeus' departure, in the phraseology he prefers, all the more significant.

case in Justin's writings of πληροῦν and its cognates being used to state the relation of the fulfilment to the prophecy or promise. [39] Now it seems to me very significant that the usage so dear to Irenaeus should be so completely absent from the works of a writer whom he knew so well and used so extensively.[40] The least that can be said is that he seems to have chosen his words carefully and deliberately in these passages, and that it would be a mistake to fail to take notice of them, natural though this mode of expression may be.

What our study of these two passages enables us to say is that 'fulfilment', in the first place, is conceived in terms of the historical unfolding of the divine plan: it is the 'filling', by the occupant of each moment in it, of the place allotted to him. Just as the patriarchs and prophets 'fulfil' their appointed 'dispensations', that is to say by foreshadowing and foretelling, Christ 'fulfils' his dispensation by 'fulfilling' theirs: by fulfilling, in other words, the promises, the Law and the prophecies of the Scriptures. The Word is the eternal co-author with the Father of the whole dispensation. Hence Christ's fulfilment of the Old Dispensation is not only the fulfilling of his 'dispensation' in the same way as the prophets and patriarchs, and all who accept God's demands on the particular moment fulfil theirs; it is this, but it is also more than this. For in fulfilling his self-appointed task, the incarnate Word fulfils the whole dispensation, 'recapitulating' it in himself as head and the Church as his body.

A brief study of two more passages in which Irenaeus speaks of 'fulfilment', will, I think, throw into greater relief the significance that he attached to this notion.

(3) Chapter 12 of Book III begins the exposition of the Church's witness to the fulfilment of the prophecies and promises in Christ. The first act of the newly born Church is to 'fill up' as Irenaeus puts

[39] The use in *Dial.* 87 refers to the Messiah's being filled with the Holy Spirit, and is not directly concerned with the fulfilment of the prophecy of *Is.* 11. 3, from the quotation of which the word derives in this passage. Similarly, in *Dial.* 42. ἐπληρώθη refers to the filling of the earth with the grace and glory of Christ, and not the prophecy of which this is the fulfilment.

[40] For Irenaeus's dependence on Justin, cf. J. Armitage Robinson's introductory essay to his translation of the *Demonstration of the Apostolic Preaching*, London, 1920, pp. 6–20.

it, the number of Apostles to the twelve required by the prophecy (Cf. Acts 1. 16–20, Ps. 68. 26 & Ps. 108. 8), thereby also fulfilling the prophecy. This is how Irenaeus describes the procedure: 'The Apostle Peter, therefore, after the resurrection and ascension of the Lord, wanting to fill up the number of the apostles to twelve *(adimplere* xii *apostolorum numerum)* ... made the 'filling up' according to what had been foretold by David' *(τὴν ἀναπλήρωσιν τῶν ἀποστόλων ἐκ τῶν ὑπο Δαβὶδ εἰρημένων)* (AH III. 12. 1). He then goes on to speak of the pentecostal outpouring of the Spirit on the apostles as God's fulfilment of his own promise *(τὴν ἰδιάν ἐπαγγελίαν πεπληρωκώς* —AH III. 12. 1). This is followed by quoting Peter's sermon (Acts 2. 27–36), the prototype of the apostolic kerygma, announcing the fulfilment of the prophecies in the events that had just taken place. And so, Irenaeus triumphantly concludes, 'the apostles did not announce another God, nor another Pleroma ...' (AH III. 12. 2) [41] 'The kerygma that Peter and John preached is manifest: it is the announcement of the good news that the promise made by God to the fathers has been fulfilled by Jesus ...' *(δι' Ἰησοῦ πεπληρῶσθαι εὐαγγελιζόμενος ....)* and that in his passion and resurrection 'God has fulfilled' all the prophecies *(ταῦτα ἐπλήρωσεν ὁ θεός* —AH III. 12. 3).

(4) The fourth passage merely underlines the weight that Irenaeus clearly places on the language of this argumentation. Again, speaking of the fulfilment of Isaiah's prophecy that the Spirit would rest on the Messiah, who would 'again, in his turn, give it to the Church' (AH III. 17. 3), Irenaeus comments: 'Thus the Spirit has descended under the predestined dispensation *(διὰ τὴν προωρισμένην οἰκονομίαν* —*super praedictam dispositionem* [42]) and the only-begotten Son of God, who is also the Father's Word, has come in the fulness of time incarnate in man *(ἐλθόντος τοῦ πληρώματος τοῦ χρόνου σαρκωθέντος ἐν ἀνθρώπῳ)*; our Lord Jesus Christ has thus fulfilled the whole human economy *(καὶ πᾶσαν τὴν κατὰ ἄνθρωπων οἰκονομίαν ἐκπληρώσαντος)*, being always one and

[41] For further discussion of this cf. my fourth 'significant Passage', below.

[42] *super*, as Harvey notes (ii. 94. n. 3) must be the translator's rendering of *ἐπί* which he must have read. Sagnard's rendering, *selon l'économie qui vient d'être indiquée*, does not fit the Greek, and misinterprets the Latin if read in the light of the Greek text.

the same, as the Lord himself attests and the Apostles confess and the prophets proclaim. Thus are shown up all the false teachings of those who invent Ogdoads and Tetrads and Heaven knows what . . .' (AH III. 17. 4), that is to say the gnostic myth of the Pleroma, which is elsewhere mentioned as such in similar passages.[43] With such deliberate and consistent choice of words Irenaeus leaves us little scope for doubt as to what it is he is hinting at: our redemption is in Christ's fulfilment of God's redemptive plan unfolding in history and in the Church's perpetuation of that fulfilment. This is the 'fulfilment' he opposes to the gnostic Pleroma. He is curiously reluctant to speak of the 'fulness' which dwells in Christ, 'the concentration of divine sanctifying power' (Cerfaux, *Le Christ* . . ., p. 320) which he spreads abroad in the Church, or, to put in another way, of 'the full presence of God in Christ as the anticipation of the fulness of redemption given in him' (Percy, *Die Probleme* . . ., p. 78). This reluctance is doubtless explained by the fact that 'pleroma' as a technical word had by this time become too much of a gnostic monopoly. Under cover of St. Paul's language, as Irenaeus seems to have appreciated, it helped to formulate a physics of redemption.

The point at which Irenaeus takes up gnosticism is the point at which its mythology becomes a physics of redemption. With the aid of the subtle transpositions of gnostic vocabulary, some of which I have studied in this essay, he substitutes for the gnostic redemption-physics a Christian redemption-history. The gnostics had seen their salvation as *by* nature, *from* history: Irenaeus sees salvation as *by* history, *in* nature. All Christian thinking must start—and Irenaeus leaves plenty of scope for it (Cf. AH I. 10.3, *infra*, p. 35)—from reflection on what God has done for his people and wrought, finally, in Christ. The failure, in his eyes, of gnosticism to provide the beginnings of a Christian theology is due precisely to its leaving no room for what must be the *datum* of all Christian theology: the redemptive history retold in the Bible. The gnostic myth, he will almost concede (Cf. AH II. 13. 10; 15. 3), may be good psychology; but good psychology is not theology. The new

[43] Cf. *omnes de plenitudine ejus accepimus* (Jo. 1. 16) — *haec itaque salutis agnitio* (AH. III. 10. 3): the true gnosis is sharing of the gifts of the incarnation, not knowledge of 'another Pleroma of thirty Aeons' etc. Cf. also III. 24. 2; and IV. 19. 3.

knowledge we are gradually acquiring of his opponents shows us his penetration and his justice to have been truly remarkable. The great Christian gnostics now appear in a much clearer light as men who attempted to christianise radically Greek and Oriental religion,[44] rather than, as used to be fashionable to hold, [45] doing the reverse.

The vital need of the moment, faced with a deceptively 'Christian' heresy in appearance, was to reaffirm, as Irenaeus saw, what even orthodox Christian exegesis had tended to blur: namely the unique historical revelation in the Bible of what God had done for men. There was, indeed, nothing that his 'beloved Marcianus' could have found as valuable for the 'confirmation of his faith'—in the setting of contemporary Gaul or Rome—than the massive simplicities of the Sunday-school Bible-history which Irenaeus addressed to him in his *Demonstration of the Apostolic Preaching*. Not that Irenaeus was blind to the vast scope for intellectual penetration of this revelation given once and for all. The programme which he outlines in a series of headings is ambitious enough to satisfy any speculative theologian. But what took precedence in his own mind, was to assert with tireless reiteration that this theological labour must consist in an attempt to grasp intellectually the one revelation, according to the varied reach of human understanding: 'and not in altering',

[44] Cf. Quispel in *Eranos Jahrbuch*, 1947, p. 271. Striking confirmation of the principles behind gnostic borrowings from Scripture can be found in the comparison of two of the treatises found at Nag Hammadi. The 'Wisdom of Jesus Christ' contains a secret revelation given in dialogue form to Mary Magdalen by the risen Lord before his ascension. It is a notable feature of most of these revelations that there is no reference to the Saviour's earthly life. This work appears to be a re-written version of another document, an 'Epistle to Eugnostos', a pagan treatise in which Christ and his disciples do not figure at all. Cf. Puech, *loc. cit.*, and Doresse, *Vig. Chr.* II. On the relation of the *Excerpts from Theodotus* to the Hermetica, which appears to follow the same lines, cf. Festugière, Notes sur les Extraits de Théodote, *Vig. Chr.* III (1949), p. 203.

[45] As late as 1932 Burkitt wrote: 'The various forms of Gnosticism are attempts to formulate and express the ordinary Christianity in terms and categories which suited the science and philosophy of the day.' (*The Church and Gnosis*, London, 1932, p. 48). He accounts for the vogue of the movement in the second century by seeing in it the result of the failure of the early Christian eschatological expectation. Cf. p. 11. Burkitt's view that gnosticism was an essentially Christian heresy was endorsed by Casey as 'undoubtedly right', cf. The Study of Gnosticism, *JTS.* XXXVI (1935), p. 58.

as he puts it, 'of its very subject-matter' (*οὐκ ἐν τῷ τὴν ὑπόθεσιν αὐτὴν ἀλλάσσειν*—AH I. 10. 3; cf. II. 28). The task of bringing philosophical equipment to this work of reflection could wait for others. The best service Irenaeus saw himself as able to render to speculative theology was to assure it of its data, namely that our salvation had been wrought in

> . . . the enchainment of past and future
> Woven in the weakness of the changing body. . .';

Or, as he put it himself, that the one Mediator of God and men, 'who was at home with both' (*διὰ τῆς ἰδίας πρὸς ἑκατέρους οἰκειότητος*) had come to 'restore friendship and concord between them and to present man to God and to reveal (*γνωρίσαι* —after the Greek of Theodoret) God to men.' (AH III. 18. 7; cf. V. 27. 2).

It has often been recognised that the historical unfolding of God's plan in the pattern of our salvation is the heart of Irenaeus's theology.[46] But notwithstanding the attention that has been paid

---

[46] Cf. A. Verrielle, Le plan du salut d'après saint Irenée, *Rev. des Sc. Rel.* XIV. (1938); K. Prümm, Göttliche Planung und Menschliche Entwicklung nach Irenaeus Adv. Haer., *Scholastik*, XIII. (1938); W. Hunger, Der Gedanke der Weltplaneinheit und Adameinheit in der Theologie des hl. Irenaeus, *Scholastik*, XVII (1942); J. Daniélou, Saint Irenée et les origines de la théologie de l'histoire, *Rech. des Sc. Rel.* XXXIV. (1947). Cf. also his *Sacamentum Futuri*, c. I. 2; and The Fathers and the Scriptures, *Theology*, LVII (1954). In particular, Cullmann's judgement in his great work, *Christ and Time* (E. Tr., London, 1951) is noteworthy: 'It is . . . no accident . . . that among theologians of the second century none fought gnosticism with such acuteness as did Irenaeus, who with unyielding consistency carried through the time-line of redemptive history from the creation to the eschatological new creation.' Down to the nineteenth century, '. . . there has scarcely been another theologian who has recognised so clearly as did Irenaeus, that the Christian proclamation stands or falls with the redemptive history, that the historical work of Jesus Christ as Redeemer forms the mid-point of a line which leads from the Old Testament to the return of Christ . . .' (pp. 56—57 The qualification which Cullmann adds in a footnote (p. 57, n. 10) to this, concerning Irenaeus's exaggeration of the 'rectilinear character of the redemptive history' (cf. also pp. 195—197), does not seem to me to do justice to the complexity of Irenaeus's position. With this remark I must leave aside any discussion of this question, which would take me too far afield. Since completing this paper I have been struck by the convergence of the general

to Irenaeus's work as a source of our knowledge of Gnosticism, little if any work has been done on assessing his own theological orientation in relation to the gnostic doctrines he records and criticises. Gnosticism, in spite of the claims that have been made for it, was not a Christian theology: but it did raise questions which Christian theology had sooner or later to face. I have tried to disentangle in this paper one of these, surely fundamental, the problem of justification. The gnostics' solution of this, if I have argued correctly, consisted in a theory of justification by nature for the elect, and the denial of its possibility (at least in the same, most real sense) for the rest; and whether my conclusion about this is right or not, this was how Irenaeus saw it. Now we shall look in vain in Irenaeus for anything like a developed theology of justification, or of grace: but his insistence on the historical character of the redemptive process amounts almost to a rudimentary theology of grace. The question of grace or nature, here ultimately resolves itself, as I have tried to show, into the question concerning the substantial unity of man. If we could see in the elements composing him elements of a real, whole being, capable of receiving the element of spirit as a gratuitous gift, then we could interpret the gnostic answer to the question as offering a theory of salvation by grace. This is precisely what Irenaeus' transposition of the gnostic redemption-terminology into the language of historical process achieved. Men and women, engaged in the flesh in living in a world created, legislated for, prepared for and made new in Christ, and awaiting in hope his final coming in glory, are verily become the recipients of a gift. (Cf. particularly, AH IV. 37. 1, 2) It seems to me that it is in this indirect fashion that we must conceive the manner in which Gnosticism had furnished Christian theology with some of its chief questions and even helped to suggest lines for the directions the answers were to take. But the concern of Irenaeus' 'theology'—for that we must call it—is first and foremost to insist that anything claiming to be a Christian theology must be in secure possession of its data for reflection. If it is indeed reflection on the redemption

---

direction of this paper and the conclusions of H. C. Puech, La Gnose et le temps, and G. Quispel, Zeit und Geschichte im antiken Christentum, both in *Eranos Jahrbuch*, 1951.

wrought by Christ entering in his flesh our human history, then, good or bad, it could claim to be Christian theology.

Here, henceforth, would be the sharp historical reality confronting ambiguities of the kind which are responsible for so many of the parallels which have been noted between Christian and gnostic expressions [47], ambiguities as embarrassing as, for instance, the Epistle of the pseudo-Barnabas [48]. Père Bouyer has indeed reminded us recently [49] that throughout the second century 'gnosis' could bear a perfectly respectable Judaeo-Christian sense, in writings beyond any possible suspicion of being 'gnosticizante'. Nevertheless, what remains disquieting about this document is what Père Bouyer aptly calls (while minimising its significance!) *le simplisme outrancier* of its Old Testament exegesis. What this amounts to is in effect a dissolution of the whole redemption-history retold in the Bible into stages of more or less disguised revelation of a timeless truth; a truth contained in riddles to be solved by adroit use of allegory. Not only is this treatment of the Old Testament so dangerously like the gnostics'; but once the principle upon which it is based is admitted, the gnostic 'interpretations' of the New Testament will appear as veritable models of sober exegetical restraint in comparison with such exegesis of the Old Testament. With the dissolution of the biblical redemptive history, the whole economy of the Incarnation and the one historically given revelation is put in jeopardy.

This has been admirably demonstrated by C. Barth in his exhaustive study of the Valentinian New Testament exegesis (*loc. cit.*, cf. *supra*, n. 29). A case of crucial importance here is that of Ptolemy's *Letter to Flora*. Its exegetical method and indeed its language are often very close to Irenaeus's; but to a careful scrutiny like that to which it has been subjected by M. Quispel (in his

[47] Cf. F. M. M. Sagnard, o. p., Intérêt théologique d'une étude de la gnose chrétienne, *Rev. des Sc. Phil. & Théol.*, XXXIII, (1949), pp. 162–170 for a good sample of such parallels in second century Christian and Gnostic writings.

[48] For a particularly clear expression of this embarrassment, cf. G. Bardy, *La théologie de l'Eglise de saint Clément de Rome à saint Irenée*, Paris, 1945, pp. 157 ff; and Cullmann's penetrating remarks. *Christ and Time*, pp. 132–133.

[49] Cf. Gnosis: Le sens orthodoxe de l'expression jusqu'aux Pères Alexandrins, in *JTS. NS.* IV. (1953), pp. 188–203.

edition of it in *SC*), the document reveals its dependence on a background of gnostic teaching identical with that which Irenaeus attributes to Ptolemy. Behind its quasi-historical language about the 'fulfilling' of the Old Law and its 'symbolising' heavenly realities, we can discern the cosmological categories of gnostic teaching about the classes of men and realms of reality. It is beyond the scope of this paper to discuss this fascinating work which exemplifies in such striking fashion the two-sidedness on which Tertullian remarked, whereby the heretics, as he puts it, *bilingues communem fidem adfirmant.* (*adv. Val.* 1). It was precisely ambiguities like this, 'the specious and plausible words with which the heretics allure the simple-minded' (AH I. Praef. 1, 2), that disquieted Irenaeus; we cannot assess the significance of his work except against against their background.

It has been necessary, therefore, to allude—however briefly and inadequately—to these writings in order to indicate the decisive importance of Irenaeus's insistence that what the Bible and the Apostolic preaching speak of are not timeless truths hidden in a manifold variety of expression, but of a history which has happened and which is the source of the typology of anticipation-and-fulfilment. The Old Testament's witness to Christ, no less than the Church's, consists in their proclaiming God's dealings with men, concentrated in the history of the chosen people and fulfilled in Christ, still to be fulfilled in his members at the Eschaton. The practice of this kind of hermeneutics Irenaeus may have learnt from Justin. But his originality lies in disengaging, for the first time in Christian literature, the principles behind it, deliberately as a self-conscious Christian theologian:

> All the heretics, struck by the diversity and apparent contrariety between the Mosaic legislation and the teaching of the Gospel, have failed to seek out the reason for the difference between the two Testaments... [all their fanciful mythology] is the result of their ignorance of the Scriptures and of God's economy. But as for us, we shall enquire into both the causes of the difference and the continuity and consonance of the two Testaments...
>
> (AH 111. 12. 2)

This is the task which Irenaeus had set himself. I have tried in this paper to trace the outlines of his solution.

Oxford.